Power is a here-today, gone-tomorrow concept in Chinese history, especially for women. In her previous novel, Empress Orchid, Anchee Min covered the first part of the life of Tzu Hsi, or Empress Orchid. Now, in The Last Empress, the empress is a widow, mother of the only male heir of the now-deceased emperor, and in a formidable position. Still, she must contend with palace intrigue on all fronts; even her eunuchs are bribed. She must put up with the smiling faces of men and women who mean her great harm, and, worst of all, her son takes up with prostitutes and dies of venereal disease. She adopts her nephew to be emperor, treats him like a son, and despairs of his weakness. Constant deceit is not the only difficulty which must be faced: incursions of foreigners and domestic rebellion are also part of this violent period at the end of the 19th century. There is the love-hate relationship with the Japanese, the Boxer Rebellion, and widespread mistrust of Western foreigners. Yet Empress Orchid believes that they must appease these factions in order to preserve the dynasty and the throne. All these problems converge to bring the Ching Dynasty to its eventual demise. A disclaimer: do not read The Last Empress as straight historical fact. Anchee Min makes no bones about the fact that her writing is meant to rehabilitate crucial female figures in Chinese history. Whichever account of Tzu Hsi is correct, the historical tradition that she was an overbearing harridan, selfish, greedy, and bloodthirsty or Mins portrayal of her as a loving mother, trying to protect her country and longing to step down but prevented from doing so by her wishy-washy son, The Last Empress is an endlessly interesting look at palace life, that hermetically sealed world that once existed in China. --Valerie Ryan

My Personal Review:
I actually did not read this, but I bought it and its predecessor Empress Orchid for my fiance and all I can say is I hear a lot about it afterward and she litterally could not put them down finishing both books in 3 days over Christmas weekend. From my understanding this a book for anyone interested in a good womans perspective and intrigue set in Chinas Imperial Court. And if you are interested in a different, more provincial prospective, my fiance also loved Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See. All three books of which are available through Amzon.com

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